

“A MAN HOLY AND PERFECT”: THE HOLY MAN AS *DIDASKALOS* (TEACHER) AND *MATHETES* (DISCIPLE AND PUPIL) IN THE *LIFE OF PAISIOS/BISHOY* ATTRIBUTED TO JOHN KOLOBOS

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Recent study of the holy man/person in Late Antiquity has focused on the saint as patron,¹ thaumaturge,² mediator and teacher,³ intercessor⁴ and, most recently, witness to holiness.⁵ All of these roles—and more—occur in the *Life of Paisios/Bishoy* attributed to John Kolobos.⁶ But one further role, that of *didaskalos* (teacher) and *mathētēs* (disciple and pupil), deserves attention.⁷

¹ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971) 80-101; rpt. in Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London: Faber 1982); Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 2 (1983) 1-25; Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6:3 (1998) 353-76.

² See Benedicta Ward, “A Sense of Wonder: Miracles of the Desert,” in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 1980) 39-46.

³ Philip Rousseau, “Ascetics as mediators and as teachers,” in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford U 1999) 45-59.

⁴ Claudia Rapp, “‘For next to God, you are my salvation’: reflections on the rise of the holy man in late antiquity,” in Howard-Johnston and Hayward, eds., *The Cult of Saints* 63-81. See also Tim Vivian, “Holy Men and Businessmen: Monks as Intercessors in Fourth-Century Egypt,” in Vivian, *Words to Live By: Journeys in Ancient and Modern Monasticism* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 2005) 323-65.

⁵ See Tim Vivian, ed., *Witness to Holiness: Abba Daniel of Scetis* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 2008).

⁶ St. John Kolobos/Colobos (4th-5th c.), also known as John the Short and John the Little, is one of the chief figures of early monasticism in Scetis (the modern Wadi al-Natrun) in Lower Egypt. See Hugh G. Evelyn White, ed. Walter Hauser, *The Monasteries of the Wādī 'N Natrūn*, Part II: The Histories of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1933; [rpt. Arno Press 1973] 106-11. See also Maged S. Mikhail and Tim Vivian, “Life of Saint John the Little,” *Coptic Church Review* 18: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer, 1997) 1-64. Our forthcoming book on John with translations of the Bohairic and Sahidic *Lives* is scheduled for publication in 2010 by Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press.

⁷ Paisios as holy man has numerous roles in the *Life*. This introduction will not attempt to canvas all of these (although it alludes to many of them) but instead focuses on Paisios as teacher and pupil/disciple.

I. SAINT PAISIOS IN HISTORY AND HAGIOGRAPHY

First it is necessary to discuss briefly the person and figure of St. Paisios/Bishoy in history and hagiography.⁸ Most of what we know about Paisios comes from his hagiographical *Life* in Greek,⁹ Syriac,¹⁰ Arabic,¹¹ and Ethiopic,¹² and thus is historically uncertain.¹³ Although the *Life* is attributed to John Kolobos, it cannot be by him, since John died first.¹⁴ It is not clear when the Greek text was written. Normally, Coptic texts were translated from Greek and then the Arabic versions were translated from Coptic, though sometimes from Greek. It is unusual not to have a Coptic manuscript when translations exist in Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic, but we also need to remember the vagaries of our evidence from Late Antiquity: there exists only one surviving complete manuscript of the *Life of John the Little*.¹⁵

It is clear, though, that Paisios was a disciple of Abba Amoi and/or John Kolobos at Scetis in the fourth century.¹⁶ As Coquin observes:

Sometime after Amoi's death, Pshoi [Paisios/Bishoy] and John Colobos decided to separate. John Colobos remained at Scetis, and Pshoi established himself two miles to the north, in a rock

⁸ Our saint comes down in monastic tradition as Paisios in Greek and Pshoi, Bishoy, and Bishoi in Coptic/ Arabic (Arabic has no "p," so transmutes the Coptic "p" [Greek *pi*] to a "b" sound). Since no Coptic *Life of Bishoy/Pshoi* survives, and since this paper draws on the Greek *Life*, I will use "Paisios" from now on. See René-Georges Coquin, "Pshoi of Scetis," *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (MacMillan: 1991), ed. Aziz S. Atiya, vol. 6, 2029a-30a. Evelyn White, 112, discusses the difficulties surrounding the name(s).

⁹ I. V. Pomialovskii, ed., *Zhitie prepodobnogo Paisiia Velikogo i Timofeia Patriarkha Alexandriiskogo* [*The Life of the Blessed Paisios and Timothy, Patriarch of Alexandria*], *Zapiski istoriko-filologicheskogo fakul'teta SPb U* [*Journal of the Historical-Philological Department of St. Petersburg University*] 2 [3?], Vol. 50 (1902) 1-61. Other Greek texts are listed in *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 1402-03d (Coquin).

¹⁰ Paul Bedjan, ed., *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, Vol. 3 (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz 1892) 572-620. Rowan A. Greer has translated the Syriac text for the planned book on Paisios/Bishoy/Pshoi.

¹¹ Muhammad Ramzi, *Al-Qamus al-Jughrafi lil-Bilad al-Misriyyah*, 2 vols. in 5 pts. Cairo, 1953-63; and G. Troupeau, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes*. Paris, 1972-74.

¹² P. Beylot, ed., "La version éthiopienne de 'l'histoire de Besoy,'" *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 203 (1986) 169-84.

¹³ Coquin (see n. 8 above) does not sufficiently distinguish between history and hagiography.

¹⁴ Absolute dating of the early desert abbas and ammas is usually impossible. Evelyn White, 160, offers the very tentative dates of 320-417 (long lives among the monks were not uncommon) for Paisios/Bishoy, and Lucien Regnault, "John Colobos, Saint," *The Coptic Encyclopedia* 1359b-62a, accepts Evelyn White's date for the death of John as October 17, 409 (Evelyn White, Vol. 2, p. 294).

¹⁵ In Boharic Coptic: Zacharie, "Vie de Jean Colobos," in *Annales du Musée Guimet* 25, ed. E. Amélineau, pp. 316-410 (Paris, 1894). There are also Sahidic Coptic fragments.

¹⁶ On John see n. 6 above.

cave. The fame of his miracles spread, and a number of disciples gathered around him, no doubt forming the nucleus of the first Dayr Anba Bishoi [the Monastery of Saint Bishoi in the modern Wadi al-Natrun].¹⁷

Since Paisios was associated with John the Little, it is safe to place most of his life in the fourth century and suggest that he died, as did John, early in the fifth century, sometime after the first destruction of Scetis.¹⁸

In the hagiographical *Life of Paisios*, Paisios serves as both teacher and pupil, thus modeling both roles for his monastic audience. The *Life of Paisios*, like most ancient monastic hagiography, is filled with miracles, divine appearances, and wondrous events; these events are important—indeed, extremely important—but they should not so preoccupy our attention (and fire our skepticism) that we miss the important theme of *paideia* (education) in the *Life*: the monastic life of teaching and learning. I would argue, in fact, that the historical aspects of early monastic texts (dates, what “happened,” who did what) are quite secondary in importance to what these texts taught, and meant to, early monastics—and, I would also insist, to what they still teach today.

Here I will look at both what Paisios teaches and what he learns. He instructs, among others, a ruler about riches and a monk about sexual temptation; he counsels a monk who apostasizes and teaches his disciples about obedience and disobedience. Paisios learns as a young monk about monastic discipleship and as an “old man” (*gerōn*) an abba, a mature monk, learns about fasting and asceticism, ministry, humility, and love of God. What does this monastic pedagogy tell us about early monastic hagiography and, more importantly, about early monasticism? What did monastic authors and readers or listeners hope to learn from such edifying tales as that of Paisios?

Of the two roles of teacher and pupil of the holy man in Late Antiquity, clearly the more familiar is that of the saint as teacher. The *Life of Antony*, the Church’s first monastic hagiography, vividly models Antony as teacher: paragraphs 16-43 of the *Life*, about a

¹⁷ See Coquin (n. 8).

¹⁸ On the first destruction of Scetis, possibly by the Mazices, see Evelyn White, Vol. 2, pp. 151-61. The Greek *Life* of Paisios/Bishoy says nothing about John and Bishoy’s flight from Scetis; the Arabic *Life*, however, says that Bishoy went to Antinoë in Upper Egypt. See Bibliothèque Nationale Fonds arabe 4796, fol. 153a-b; Evelyn White, 158. Evelyn White, 160, offers the very tentative dates of 320-417 for Paisios/Bishoy.

quarter of the work, have Antony instructing his followers in great detail about demons and the ascetic life. This famous section could lull us into believing that Antony the instructor sprang full grown, like Athena from the head of Zeus, from the imagination of Athanasius. But the *Life* itself informs us that before Antony was a famous teacher to whom people traveled from far and wide, he was first a humble student in the ascetic life: immediately after his call to the gospel life, he went, the *Life* says, to “an old man in the neighboring village. From his youth [the old man] had practiced the solitary life of an ascetic. When Antony saw him, he emulated him in goodness. So, like him, Antony began his ascetic practice by staying in places outside that village.”¹⁹

Athanasius emphasizes that Antony was a diligent and enterprising student—one whom any modern instructor would love to have in the classroom:

While there, if he heard about someone who was seriously practicing ascetic discipline somewhere, he would go like the wise honeybee and search out that person, and he would not return again to his own village unless he had seen him. Thus he was like someone who received provisions from that person for traveling the road to virtue.²⁰

An eager learner, Antony is not content with one teacher, but seeks out anyone who can teach him: he goes “to those who devoted themselves to ascetic discipline and sincerely submitted himself to them and closely observed the excellence of each person’s zeal and ascetic discipline.” In Athanasius’ approving eyes, Antony is an acute and avid pupil:

He observed the graciousness of one and the intense prayer of another; he meditated on one’s lack of anger and another’s love for humanity; he came to understand how one passed the night in prayerful vigil and another studied the Bible. He marveled at one’s patient endurance and another’s fasting and sleeping on the ground; he carefully observed one’s gentleness and the patience of another. He kept in his thoughts the devotion to Christ and the love for one another that they all shared.

¹⁹ *Life of Antony* 3.3-4, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 2003) 61.

²⁰ *Life of Antony* 3.4, Vivian and Athanassakis, trans., 61-63.

“Filled with these observations,” the *Life* informs us, Antony “returned to his own place of ascetic discipline. From then on, recollecting in himself each person’s ascetic practices, he zealously endeavored to manifest all of them in himself.”²¹

The *Life of Antony* is, undoubtedly, an idealized portrait; just as Antony in the *Life* is the ideal Christian child, so too he becomes the perfect pupil, then the inspiring teacher, then the model layperson and stout defender of orthodoxy.²² From the mass of early monastic evidence, literary, archeological, and papyrological, there can be no doubt, however, that Antony, the prototypical monk, accurately represents a basic, and essential, monastic experience: the monk must learn to crawl before he can spiritually walk—or ascend to heaven. Late antique monks are not autodidacts; there is very little—if any—rugged individualism in the world of early Christian monasticism. Even the most solitary monks, the anchorites and wandering monks, begin their ascetic journey within a community. The neophyte monk, the *mathētēs* (the term, which means both “disciple” and “pupil,” used in the New Testament for Jesus’ followers), must sit at the feet of the older, experienced monk, the *abba* or “old man,” who becomes his teacher in the spiritual life. This almost universal pattern holds true also for the *Life of Paisios*.

II. PAISIOS AS DISCIPLE AND PUPIL (MATHETES)

One of the most difficult terrains for the modern student—or spiritual descendant—of early Christian monasticism to traverse in the *Lives* of the saints is the seeming no-man’s-land between history and hagiography. For example, in the *Life of Antony* much of what Antony does and says—indeed, much of who he is—is based on Scripture, Antony as *homo biblicus*: Athanasius models a great deal of what Antony says, thinks, and does on scriptural precedents.²³ But does that make Antony’s famous scriptural “conversion” experience (or experiences) hagiographical rather than historical?²⁴ Not necessarily. It is eminently believable that Antony did indeed ponder biblical examples and hear Jesus’ words in church and decide to faithfully follow them; it is also thoroughly believable that Antony modeled

²¹ *Life of Antony* 4.1-2; Vivian and Athanassakis, trans., 63-65.

²² See David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, (Oxford Early Christian Studies Series (Oxford: Clarendon 1995).

²³ See the Introduction by Vivian in *Life of Antony*, xxiii-xxxix.

²⁴ See *Life of Antony* 2.1-5 (Mt 4:20, 19:27; Acts 4:34-35; Mt 19:21) and 3.1 (Mt 6:34).

much of who he was on Jesus, his scriptural hero. "What would Jesus do?" had not yet degenerated into bumper sticker cliché.

The ground is rockier, though, when we move from scriptural emulation to scriptural typology. As a child in the *Life*, Antony is too good to be true.²⁵ In his "Encomium on Saint Antony," written shortly after the great ascetic's death, John, bishop of Shmūn, takes Antony, the child of Egyptian parents, and furthers the theme, typologically elevating him into a child of Egypt herself:

Antony, says Athanasius, was Egyptian by birth. Where will the sun rise except in the east? And where do you wish Antony to shine forth except in Egypt, the place where sin abounded but grace abounded all the more, where the poor blossom and foreigners gather? For most of the saints who have lived have been from Egypt or Egypt has attracted them from other places, as a valley collects on its valley floor waters that flow into it from both sides, or as the sea which contains its own waters also has rivers flowing into it continuously from all directions.²⁶

The author of the *Life of Paisios* (attributed, incorrectly, to John Kolobos, but whom we shall for convenience sake, call "John")²⁷ has an equal ambition for his adopted child; he personifies Egypt into Paisios' mother:

Egypt, therefore, brought forth the great and famous man. It was she who long ago produced Moses, who saw God; through his relationship with God, Moses became the greatest of the prophets, famous in the Holy Scriptures for his surpassing miracles. Not long afterwards, she demonstrated her glory through the shining example of the virtues of the holy Paisios, greatly enriching his name.

For John, the historical time span between Moses of old and Paisios of the here and now is a hagiographical blink of the eye: Paisios appears "not long after" Moses. Moses was "the greatest of the prophets,"

²⁵ See *Life of Antony* 1.1.

²⁶ See John of Shmūn, "An Encomium on Saint Antony," 6-9, in Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 2003) 12-14; the quotation is from par. VI on p. 12.

²⁷ See n. 14 above. Evelyn White points out, 111, that the *Life*, like most Coptic *Lives*, is really a panegyric delivered on the saint's feast day. He cannot determine whether the original dates before the seventh century.

famous for "his surpassing miracles"; Paisios will be renowned for "the shining example" of his virtues. Not incidentally, Paisios, like Moses, will be the author of numerous miracles.

By contrast, Athanasius is, perhaps surprisingly, rather circumspect about Antony's parents. He says merely that the future saint's "parents were well-born and possessed enough property to be self-sufficient. Because they were Christians, Antony was also brought up as a Christian."²⁸ John is less modest. To him, Paisios' parents "were devout and God-fearing, walking blamelessly in God's commandments and possessing all goodness. To them were born seven children who possessed the same virtues" (Paragraph III).²⁹ But Paisios' father, like Antony's parents, dies, leaving "his most noble wife" to care for the children. John, as the evangelist Luke with Jesus, is more interested in the holy man's mother: an "angel of the Lord" appears to her, as to Mary in Luke's Gospel, and instructs her about the Lord's wishes: "Dedicate one of your sons to God Most High; through him, God's all-holy name, which is always glorified, will be glorified" (III). Paisios' mother, again like Mary, does as the angel commands: "May your mercy be upon me."³⁰ Accordingly, Paisios "became a lover of the virtues and increased both in age and in grace," and, like Antony, was destined for greater things: "wounded by both love and fear of God, he fell in love with the monastic way of life." "After some time had passed, during which," John vaguely says, "it was necessary for him to keep the divine commandments, by divine grace he entered the desert of Scetis like a spotless lamb and was guided to the divine Pambo, the shepherd of the spiritual flock."³¹ Thus Paisios, like Antony, leaves the confines of home—however holy—and begins his ascetic discipleship, Antony with "an old man in the neighboring village" and Paisios with "the divine Pambo, the shepherd of the spiritual flock" (IV).

In hagiographical terms, Pambo becomes both Paisios' mother and his father: an angel appeared to Paisios' mother; a "heavenly vision" now instructs Pambo concerning Paisios. Paisios' earthly father died; Pambo now becomes the future saint's spiritual father (V).³² The *Life of Paisios* at first presents Paisios and Pambo in the classic disciple-

²⁸ *Life* 1.1.

²⁹ All translations are from the Greek *Life* translated by Vivian and Athanassakis (see n. 9 above).

³⁰ See Lk 1:38. Both Mary and Paisios' mother use the optative (*genoito* = "may") in their responses to the angels.

³¹ "Pambo" must be a mistake in the Greek manuscript for Amoi, the abba to John the Little. The Arabic *Life* calls him Bāmūyeh. See Evelyn White, 112. The close connection of Paisios/Bishoy to John makes it almost certain that Amoi was abba to both.

³² In par. V, John is referred to as Paisios' "father" and "our divine father."

abba relationship, but then subverts—or completes—that relationship in two ways. Paisios at first “willingly,” normatively, does “everything his father saw fit to order” and does it “perfectly.”³³ But Paisios is clearly a young colt not satisfied with the pen in which he has been placed; as soon as John says Paisios is an obedient disciple, he immediately adds that “later” Paisios adds to Pambo’s instructions “by advancing in perfection, taking on a harder way of life” (V). Pambo gently corrects his charge for his excessive ascetic zeal, telling him that as a rookie (“a combatant who is a beginner”) he must, literally, lower his sights, which he in good obedience does. A beginner, Pambo instructs, “should always look down at his feet while with his mind continuously looking upwards with eyes of discernment, contemplating the beauties of the ineffable glory of God” (V).

The second subversion—or consummation—is not so much Paisios’ as John’s—and the Bible’s. When Paisios follows his teacher’s instruction, John uses two carefully chosen words to advance his theme. Paisios obeys his teacher (*didaskalos*) by being instructed through his edifying words. The word for “instructed,” *mustagōgētheis*, is the same word used of Antony in *Life of Antony* 14:2: “having been initiated [*mustagōgētheis*] into the divine mysteries.”³⁴ Paisios, then, is also the disciple of the great Antony, the “father” of monasticism. Pambo’s instructions to Paisios are for him to lower his gaze and not look directly into anyone’s eyes:³⁵ “for three years” Paisios carries out “this very order to the letter, not looking into anyone’s face at all.”

³³ This topos of monastic obedience may have its best expression in the *Life of John the Little* (see n. 6 above): in par. 10, Abba Amoi each day comes out in the morning with his palm-branch, and chases after Abba John, saying to him, “Get out of here!”; in §12 John accepts a harsh rebuke: “John, you now resemble a prostitute who sits and adorns herself in order to have many lovers”; in 16 when John comes to church one day, “a great and proven father” rises, slaps John many times in the face, and throws him out of church, saying to him, “Is it time to come to church, you worthless runt?”; 25 tells the famous story of “the tree of obedience” in which Abba Amoi “plants” a stick of wood in the desert and tells John to water it. For three years John travels overnight to get water, returning in the morning to water the stick, after which “the tree lived, blossomed, and brought forth fruit. The elder Abba Amoi took the fruit of the tree and brought it to the church and gave it to the elders, saying, ‘Take, eat from the fruit of obedience’” [Mt 26:26 and see Gen 3].

³⁴ The word recurs in XXIII, when an “old man” (a senior monk) is “instructed in the divine mysteries” (*memustagōgētai*) by a divine voice.

³⁵ This is a monastic topos. In the *Life of John the Little* 76, John tells his disciple after a trip: “Forgive me, brothers, I heard earlier that there was a great multitude in Alexandria, but I did not see the face of anyone there except for the archbishop’s alone.” When the brothers heard this they were troubled and said to the elder, “Has the city been destroyed, our father?” In response our holy father Abba John said to them, “No, that’s not what I meant. I did not allow pride to rule me, not even to raise my eyes to see the face of anyone except for the archbishop’s alone. Strengthen yourself,” he said to the brothers, “guard your senses so your heart will be pure at all times so you will become a temple and a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit” [1 Cor 6:19] (Mikhail and Vivian, “John the Little”; see n. 6 above).

If Paisios' obedience were to end here, it would not be remarkable, except, perhaps, for its duration.³⁶ In fact, the reader expects this pericope to end now, with Paisios acting the dutiful disciple. But Paisios (or John) once again pushes on ahead, beyond the confines of the abba-disciple relationship; just as Paisios earlier, in his quest for perfection, moved beyond Pambo's instructions, here he does not satisfy himself merely with keeping the letter of Pambo's law but "instead" devotes himself "completely to reading the Holy Scriptures and searching out their meaning" (VI). There appears to be no logical connection between humility and studying Scripture, but there is a spiritual one; lowering one's eyes does not give one extra time for study—unless one thinks spiritually and imagines Paisios lowering his eyes from the face to the page.

By lowering his eyes, Paisios acquires humility, a much-cherished monastic virtue; by lowering them to the (scriptural) page, he achieves sainthood: he first becomes David, then Paul. The author of the *Life* has reached a defining moment; Paisios has moved beyond Pambo and his spiritual fatherhood, but how is John to define this movement? With Scripture, the very words that Paisios is studying. As Paisios "searches out" the Scriptures, he does so in biblical metaphor that ends up being more than metaphor. Paisios "would irrigate with their flowing streams, giving his soul water to drink." This image reminds John of the psalmist David, so he asks our permission ("if I may") to describe Paisios in the words of the psalmist: he is "like a tree that, flourishing when planted beside the watercourses, blossoms and bears ripe, sweet fruit in due and proper season" (Ps 1:3). It is a lovely metaphor, especially in arid lands such as Israel and Egypt, but the referent to the simile in the antecedent verses (vss. 1-2) is what really matters. Why is Paisios like a flowering, fruitful tree? The verses immediately prior to Psalm 1:3 provide the answer:

Happy are those
Who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
Or take the path that sinners tread,
Or sit in the seat of scoffers;
But their delight is in the law of the LORD,
And on his law they meditate day and night. (Ps. 1:1-2)

³⁶ Three years in early monastic timekeeping is not a particularly long time; see above, n. 33, where John waters "the tree of obedience" for three years. In the *Life of Pambo* 2, in Tim Vivian, trans., *Four Desert Fathers: Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt, and Macarius of Alexandria. Coptic Texts Relating to the Lausiac History of Palladius* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's 2004) 58-59, Pambo spends eight years "learning" (putting into practice) one verse of one psalm.

This is why they—and Paisios—are like a flourishing tree: they follow the Lord. John's original monastic audience, steeped in the Psalms, knew this because they knew the verses just before Psalm 1:3. Because the words of Scripture are so important to Paisios, John summons another metaphor from the Psalms to describe his saint: "As a result I may also speak this way, adducing these words [for this passage was a favorite of his]: 'How sweet are your words to my throat, sweeter than honey to my mouth!'" (Ps 119:3).

"Thus," John says, because of Paisios' immersion in the Scriptures, "he was someone," now like Paul, "who prayed unceasingly, with fasts and all-night vigils" (2 Cor 6:5). He is also like Antony, "stifling and enslaving his body, faithfully keeping in his heart whatever any wise person said" (see *Life of Antony* 3.4). Paisios has become the disciple not only of Pambo, but also of David, Paul, Antony, and the Lord. Pambo recognizes this: when he "observed him progressing in the godly virtues, he even more assiduously offered him his hand, rousing him and moving him forward; and so, quickly guiding him and leading him into all knowledge and action, he rightly proclaimed him tried and tested." Paisios, just as Antony, has moved beyond the boundaries of the abba-disciple relationship, but—a crucial point—he has done it with the help and blessing of his abba. Paisios will now follow in Pambo's—and Paul's—footsteps, "always pushing forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3:13; X); "our father Paisios zealously carried out the apostle's precept, 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,' devoting himself to other, more severe, spiritual struggles" (Phil 3:13; XXXII).

Spiritually, and dramatically (that is, within the dramatic arc of the story), Paisios now no longer needs Pambo, so it is time for Pambo to die:

The time for the old man's death was drawing near, summoning him to his appointed place in heaven. Holy Pambo, hastening towards the numerous blessings he desired, proclaimed Paisios worthy and, prophesying at length and in detail concerning him, departed from this life for life eternal. (VII)

Paisios has learned all he can from Pambo; he is now an abba, a monastic spiritual leader and teacher. Desert monasticism insists, however, on continuing education, even for holy men such as Paisios.³⁷ Christ will now be his teacher.

³⁷ See n. 34 above: an "old man" (a senior monk) is "instructed in the divine mysteries" (*memustagōgētai*) by a divine voice.

III. CHRIST AS TEACHER; PAISIOS AS DISCIPLE AND PUPIL

Paisios, Disciple and Pupil

The most famous image of Paisios in Coptic iconography is that of the saint washing Christ's feet.³⁸ This icon accurately captures Paisios' reverence for the Lord but does not illustrate the pedagogical nature of their relationship unless one knows, as many Copts do, the stories behind the iconic scene. Paisios washes Christ's feet because Christ is his Lord and Savior, but *also* because Christ is his master and teacher.

Christ appears to Paisios six times in the *Life*, not all of the appearances strictly pedagogical in nature.³⁹ The first time (XIII), Paisios is sitting "in his cave with a divine hymn on his lips." The Lord speaks to him, as he spoke earlier in sacred history with Abraham and Macarius the Great,⁴⁰ making him a promise similar to what he made Macarius and Abraham: "Do you see this desert, in all its length and breadth? Through you I will fill it with monks glorifying my name." Paisios, as often happens both in the Bible and in monastic literature, has his doubts and wonders how Christ will accomplish his intention. The Lord assures him: "Believe me, I am telling the truth. If I find that they hold love as the mother of virtues and keep my commandments, no one will lack what he needs. I will take complete care of them." Paisios, still not convinced, asks how the monks will be able to defeat the Devil, who prowls the desert. Christ reiterates: "If, as I told you, they keep my commandments with humility and righteousness and a humble heart, not only will I make them immune to evil plots and the warfare that threatens them, I will also proclaim them inheritors of the eternal kingdom in the heavenly habitations." He then ascends into heaven. Here Christ has taught Paisios, as God previously taught Abraham and Macarius, to have faith and to trust in the Lord.⁴¹

The final two appearances of Christ to Paisios are more clearly pedagogical, with Christ as the teacher and Paisios the pupil/disciple.

³⁸ See Jn 13:5; *Life of Paisios* LXIX. An icon I have from Saint Demiana's Monastery in Egypt shows Bishoy, draped in blue, wearing a monastic headdress, kneeling before a seated Christ, who is robed in red. Bishoy looks up reverently at the Lord as he washes his right foot with water from a large earthenware vessel. Christ, meanwhile, lays his hand on Bishoy's forehead and blesses him.

³⁹ XIII, XXI, XXVI-XXIX, XXXIV, XLVII, XLVIII-XLIX.

⁴⁰ For Abraham, see Gen 17-18; for Macarius, see "The Life of Macarius of Scetis" 3 in Tim Vivian, trans., *Saint Macarius the Spiritbearer: Coptic Texts Relating to Saint Macarius the Great* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's 2004) 153-54.

⁴¹ Throughout the *Life*, God segues into Christ. Early Christians often saw Christ in the theophanies in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

In the first (XLVII), using a Gospel parable, Christ teaches Paisios about the heavenly rewards for good works: Paisios has been fasting twenty-two days when Christ appears and tells him, "Paisios, since you suffer so much on my behalf, I want you to be my chosen one." Paisios responds that his suffering is nothing, but the Lord insists, "Every good work is acceptable to me and I will repay the worker full wages for his work. Come, then; follow me." Christ then takes Paisios to see a "true champion" who, although he has been fasting only two days, is suffering horribly. When Paisios asks why this is so, when he himself fasted for twenty-two days with no ill effects, Christ explains, "Because you are strengthened by my grace, you fast with strength and perseverance. This fellow, however, like an athlete, fasts on his own; inflamed with desire, he allows himself to suffer beyond his ability to do so." Paisios asks what this man's reward will be, and Christ uses the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30) to explain,

I will repay him with the same reward for two days as I will you for twenty-two, and that Gospel saying will apply to both of you: "Enter into the joy of your Lord"—to you, who have received five talents, and to him, who has received two, for both of you have been seen equally doing what is good and you have both been zealous to the best of your ability.

Early Christian and early monastic literature uses this parable, along with the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), to teach the monks not to pride themselves over others with regard to spiritual practices. Here, though, Paisios has no such hubris, but the Lord teaches him (and the reader/hearer of the *Life*) anyway that all spiritual efforts are good. Thus, as Paisios learns, his community learns a Gospel truth.

In Christ's earlier visits to Paisios, the monk seems to be an idealized "man holy and perfect," who does not need much spiritual education. In Christ's final appearance, however, Paisios plays the role of the true *mathētēs* (pupil), the disciple who does not understand several key monastic concepts and must be taught them by a loving abba, or father. Here, though, the abba is Christ. The *Life* begins this pericope (XLVIII-XLIX) by seeming to praise Paisios: "Our father Paisios from that time added even greater spiritual struggles, always importuning God to rise above the need for food. Food for him was partaking each Sunday of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus

Christ.” But “the Saviour once again in his compassion appears to his servant” and rebukes him: “Why are you still making requests about food when you do not eat anyway? You should use this time to ask for other things.” Paisios the pupil then asks Christ five questions about the spiritual life. Paisios the abba now becomes Paisios the disciple, with Christ assuming the role of abba. Now we know the back story to the Coptic icon of Paisios washing Christ’s feet: it is not just an icon of servanthood, but also one of discipleship, *mathēteia*, which in Greek and in the *Life* means both discipleship and pupilhood.

Abba Christ

The five questions that Paisios asks Abba Christ could easily be read as separate apophthegms from the *Apophthegmata*, the *Sayings* of the desert fathers and mothers. To give just two examples:

(1) Paisios said, “Lord, when I leave the desert here to go visit the brothers, I want to return as quickly as possible. I cannot bear to be gone long, even for the sake of others.”

[Christ] said, “Do not be sad about this. When you are away from the desert here, I have not left you.”

(2) Then Paisios said, “Free me from anger, Christ.”

“If you want to defeat anger and rage,” he said, “do not rebuke anyone or hate anyone or denigrate anyone. If you guard yourself against doing these, you will not get angry.” (both XLVIII)

In fact, the final three questions—which are really one—reflect an important theme in the *Apophthegmata*: the monastic tension between the call to solitude and prayer vs. the Gospel imperative to minister to others. Paisios wants to know what difference there is (“Does the reward differ for each person?”) between the person who “struggles⁴² . . . and ministers to others” and the person who “struggles and does not minister to others.” Christ’s answer is blunt: “The person who spiritually struggles alone is my disciple [*mathētēs*], but the person

⁴² Gk: *agōnizomneōs*. *Agōnizomai* (“fight, struggle, strive”) is a key concept in early monasticism; see W. G. H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon 1961) 25B-26A.

who spiritually struggles and ministers to others is my son and heir.”⁴³ Discipleship, Christ says, is not enough—at least not discipleship defined solely by a spirituality of heavenly solitude. True discipleship, insists Christ, is both solitude *and* ministry to others. This marriage seems to be one of opposites to someone looking at the monastic experience from outside. But the very abba-disciple relationship that defines so much of early anchoritic and semi-anchoritic monasticism cherishes at its center both solitude *and* ministry.

One would think Christ’s response is plenty clear, but Paisios the pupil still has a concern: What if ministering to others impedes one’s spiritual struggles and he “does not find himself at all the equal of those who only spiritually struggle?” “Will he receive equal payment?” “Yes,” the Saviour says simply and definitively, “he will ascend to heaven.” Seeing Paisios thus instructed, ancient readers (or listeners) of the text understood that Paisios, however holy and great, was, like them, to some degree still a novice in the spiritual life. A very important early monastic theme instructs *all* monks: “Begin anew each day.”

Lest these same readers or listeners, however, undervalue Paisios’ greatness, the *Life* is at pains to show that Paisios is *both* pupil/disciple *and* teacher/master/abba. In fact, after pars. XLVII-XLIX, where Paisios is most clearly a disciple, the *Life* turns to his “astounding miracles” (XLIX) and other marvelous events in the saint’s life. This depiction culminates in par. LXIX, where Paisios washes Christ’s feet. Christ comes to Paisios with two angels, “as he had the patriarch Abraham,”⁴⁴ once again drawing attention to Paisios’ Abrahamic (and Macarian) inheritance. Paisios eagerly welcomes them, “emulating the hospitality of that patriarch.” Paisios, in fact, surpasses Abraham: “He did not busy himself with food and drink, however, but rather possessed a pure disposition.” Here John follows normative early-Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, which sees the persons and events of the Jewish scriptures as “types,” imperfect yet vital foreshadowings of New Testament realities and truths; he contrasts the “carnal” nature of Abraham’s hospitality with the spiritual nature of Paisios. By his great humility, Paisios transcends Abraham;

⁴³ *Klērōnomos esti kai huīos*. Both *klērōnomos* (heir) and *huīos* (son) have acute biblical resonance: in Rom 8:14 Paul declares that “all who are led by the spirit of God are children [*huīoi*] of God and in Rom 16-17 Paul says further that the Spirit bears witness that “we are children [*tekna* here] of God, and if children [*tekna*], then heirs [*klērōnomoi*], heirs [*klērōnomoi*] of God and joint heirs [*sunklērōnomoi*] with Christ.” In the New Testament, of course, Jesus is “Son of Man” and “Son of God” and in Mk 1:11, God says to Jesus after his baptism, “You are my Son [*huīos*], the Beloved” (see 2 Sam 7:14 and Ps 2:7).

⁴⁴ See Gen 18.

he becomes the consummate teacher, teaching not by word alone but by example. Paisios begins his ascetic life by seeking out Abba Pambo as a disciple seeks out a master; after Pambo's death, Paisios himself becomes the abba and teacher. The teacher, though, is still a disciple. Although the *Life* continues to depict Paisios as a disciple/pupil, he is now *Christ's* disciple and pupil, and this relationship allows the *Life* now to view Paisios much more as guide and teacher, a holy man leading the way to Christ.

IV. "AGENT OF SALVATION": PAISIOS AS TEACHER (*DIDASCALOS*)

Shortly after Pambo's death (in narrative terms), Paisios and John separate, by order of "a divine angel" (XII), who foreshadows Christ's Abrahamic declaration to Paisios that "through you I will fill [this desert] with monks glorifying my name" (XIII). Immediately after this, Paisios, like Jesus, like Antony, suffers the machinations of the Devil—"the Father of Envy and Misanthropic Enemy"—and, like Jesus and Antony, defeats them.⁴⁵ The "chameleon-like Enemy," "the Treacherous One," then approaches "one of the rulers of Egypt, a proud and rich man," and entices the unsuspecting man to lavish goods and money on Paisios (XIV).⁴⁶ This diabolic subterfuge, however, becomes the opportunity for Paisios to act as ethical and moral teacher. "Forgive me, my Christ-loving friend," Paisios responds:

If we want to live in this desert, gold or silver is of no use to us. Come now, no one living here will accept anything from you. So go, and do not be sad: God has accepted your gift, if you distribute what you have brought to the poor and needy, for there are many needy in the villages of Egypt, both orphans and widows. If you provide for them in God's name, you will have your reward.
(XV)

In his first act of teaching, Paisios emphasizes the monastic and Gospel theme of giving to others. He teaches the rich ruler that the real power of money is in giving to "the poor and needy."

Paisios—ascetic, holy man, teacher—now becomes another Antony: "Throngs of people, both lay persons and monastics, by the

⁴⁵ For Jesus, see the temptation in the desert immediately after his baptism (Mk 1:12-13, expanded in Lk 4:1-13); for Antony, see *Life of Antony* 8-10.

⁴⁶ This too is an early monastic topos; see "The Life of Pambo" 4-5 (= *Lausiac History* 10.2-4) in Vivian, trans., *Four Desert Fathers* (n. 33 above) 59-61.

grace of God flowed to the divine Paisios like a river overrunning its banks, desiring to remain with him" (XIX). Again like Antony, "with divine eloquence," he wins over "a vast multitude of monks." Like Antony, Paisios now becomes the monastic teacher *par excellence*, able to instruct different kinds of monks in the monastic life:

Those whom love had inflamed to live in solitude [anchorites] he taught [*edidaske* < *didaskein*: *didaskalos*, "teacher"] to keep company with God through prayer while those who were used to obedience [semi-anchorites, cenobites] he ordered to live in accord with one another and to live together in a brotherhood.⁴⁷

For some Paisios appoints manual work, while he sets down "this rule above all others: not to do anything — nothing at all — in accordance with one's own will but to pursue everything with the advice, knowledge, and approval of one's spiritual father." These, John says, were Paisios' "instructions" (*didaskalias*) "and the care and concern he showed for his neighbor" (XX).

Teaching and Ministry as Soteriology

In the *Life of Paisios* the sections on Paisios as teacher interweave with passages about him as pupil/disciple, and both these themes interlace with pericopes emphasizing other aspects of the holy man: prophet,⁴⁸ mystic,⁴⁹ intercessor⁵⁰ and, posthumously, thaumaturge.⁵¹ Thus, to John, Paisios is "a man holy and perfect," a complete holy man: abba, intercessor, prophet, mystic, teacher and, neither last nor least, humble pupil and disciple of Christ. After a long section that shows Paisios as intercessor (XXII-XXXI), the *Life* returns to the subject of Paisios as teacher, integrating the theme of teaching with the attendant theme of ministry. In the monastic community of the *Life*, both teaching and ministry are soteriological. This union is so important to early monasticism precisely because one of monasticism's greatest dangers is solipsistic salvation (or salvific solipsism):

⁴⁷ *Edidaske* is the third-person singular imperfect tense in Greek; since the imperfect is the past progressive, *edidaske* emphasizes the ongoing nature of Paisios' teaching: he didn't teach just once, but continually.

⁴⁸ E.g., XLV-XLVI.

⁴⁹ E.g., XLIV.

⁵⁰ E.g., XXII-XXXIII.

⁵¹ LXXX.

But God, because he did not want Paisios alone to be saved but wanted others to be saved through him, did not think he ought to leave this lamp shining all by himself while others lacked the brilliant light he radiated. Therefore he ordered Paisios to leave where he was and go to the outer desert in order to strengthen the brothers there and to teach [*didaxai* < *didaskein*] them and with his teaching [*didaskalia*] make them imitators and lovers of his holy way of life, which was equal to that of the angels. (XXXII)

God makes it clear at the end of this pedagogical commissioning that teaching is indeed soteriological: "To be sure, your labors on behalf of others will not be considered equal to those you do here, but you will receive double the compensation, and even more, in the heavenly Jerusalem because of those who are being saved through your teaching [*didaskalias*]" (XXXIV). Since this is so, the teacher becomes a savior, an *alter Christus* (or *alter Salvator*), and the language of the *Life* imitates that of the Gospels in their descriptions of Jesus' charisma:

When he went there, his arrival did not escape the notice of those who loved the good things that man had to offer, for a multitude rushed to him, thirsting for the virtue he possessed: he was an ever-flowing fountain providing everyone with the flowing waters of immortality. I too wanted to see him because it was possible to share in his grace just by beholding him. (XXXIV)⁵²

The Teacher as Basket-weaver: Theologian and Apologist

It is appropriate that Paisios' charism emulates Christ's because one of his duties in the *Life* is to defend and teach about the Trinity (XLI-XLIII). A "certain old man," a monk,⁵³ asserted "that the duality of the Holy Trinity should be worshipped, that is, the Father and the Son, but that the Spirit should not be called 'God,' and he ensnared many others in his error." But God "did not want the old man's ascetic labor and sweat to be vainly squandered so he revealed the old man's ideas to the divine Paisios, as well as showing him the region and location where the old man lived." In a delightful story reminiscent

⁵² Perhaps the most intriguing of the biblical mimeses in the *Life* is in par. XXXVI when John overhears a conversation between Paisios and the late emperor Constantine, who "just now came . . . from heaven" and spoke to Paisios, saying, "Blessed [*makarioi*; see Mt 5:3-12] are you [pl.] who have been considered worthy to follow the monastic way of life." Paisios has it—on Constantine's authority!—that the monastic way of life is a beatitude.

⁵³ *Gerōn* became a term for "monk."

of the *Apophthegmata*,⁵⁴ typical of the early monastic ability to make the abstract concrete, Paisios goes to persuade the old man not just with words but with three-handled baskets he makes, thus combining abstract theology with vivid and concrete examples (a three-handled basket, I suspect, was something of a rarity). As Paisios instructs the mistaken old man:

Because . . . I am a friend and lover of the supremely holy Trinity, it is incumbent upon me to represent through my work the persons of the Trinity and to praise the Trinity in a three-fold fashion by making these three signs representing it. That one Nature expresses itself in three Persons. If someone understands this differently, he does not think correctly and should not hold such an opinion. Each basket has one nature with three *hypostases*,⁵⁵ for in each of the three handles the entire essence of each basket manifests itself equally. In this way, then, the immaterial Nature and superessential Godhead is manifested in three forms or persons—the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit—and the whole essence abides in each. Concerning the three, neither more nor less is spoken of, seeing that one does not claim to be greater in nature than another. (XLI)

Paisios the pastoral teacher now also becomes teacher as theologian; the connection between the two is that both pastor and theologian act as saviors:

Citing numerous examples about the Holy Spirit from the God-inspired Scriptures, he brought them to true knowledge. Afterwards, admonishing them and teaching [*didaxas* < *didaskein*] all of them to confess the Holy Trinity, and directing them to repent their intoxication with heresy, he [like Antony] returned to the desert, offering up hymns of thanksgiving (XLIII).

Compassionate Intercessor-Savior

After sections on Paisios as mystic (XLIV), prophet (XLV-XLVI), and pupil (XLVII, XLVIII-XLIX), the *Life* returns to the theme of

⁵⁴ For the story of the leaking basket, see Moses 2 in the *Apophthegmata; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 1975) 138-39.

⁵⁵ *Hypostasis* (plural: *hypostaseis*) is a concrete manifestation of an abstract reality: being, substance, reality. For its many nuances, with patristic citations, see W. G. H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 1454-61.

Paisios as teacher-savior (LIIIA-LVII). A “certain disciple” (*mathētēs*), away on a business trip, led astray by a Jew, denies that Jesus is the Messiah and immediately falls “from the grace of baptism.”

When the monk returns, Paisios refuses to come near him: “in his teacher’s [*didaskalou* < *didaskalos*] eyes, he was now without grace.” When the disciple asks what is wrong, Paisios hurls at him, “That person I used to know was a Christian and possessed baptism. You are not he. If you are indeed that disciple, you have lost your baptism and the identifying marks that make you a Christian” (LIV). Later in Paisios’ dressing down of the disciple, after the disciple mistakenly professes his innocence Paisios reiterates his earlier charge, but now adds that the disciple has denied Christ and faces damnation:

You miserable person! With your words you both denied Christ and stripped yourself of your divine Baptism. Get out of here! Weep for yourself as much as you want. You and I have nothing to do with one another! Your name is written with those who have denied Christ, and with them you will face the same punishments in Hell. (LVI)

With tears, the disciple importunes Paisios, moving him to compassion. Paisios the teacher-savior, the defender of Christ, now becomes Paisios the compassionate intercessor-savior:

He acted as an ardent suppliant before God on behalf of that monk, asking God to forgive him his offense. God did not ignore this request but immediately complied with what the saint asked. The object of Paisios’ supplication was to release the monk from his debt and restore divine baptism for him. The old man saw the Holy Spirit like a dove enter the disciple’s mouth, demonstrating that the gift of the Spirit had returned, while the spirit of blasphemy came out like smoke and dissipated in the air. (LVII)

V. “HOLY AND PERFECT”: PAISIOS AS ROLE MODEL

In the remainder of the *Life*, Paisios plays numerous roles: spiritual advisor (LVIII), discerner of spirits (LIX-LXII, LXIII), intercessor (LXIV-LXVII, LXVIII), disciple and teacher (LXIX-LXXIV), and again discerner of spirits (LXXV). Nearing the end of his narrative, John even summarizes the virtues/roles of Paisios and his friend and fellow

holy man Paul of Tamma: "The two of them, acting independently, were wonderworkers, deliverers from the passions, experienced healers of souls, as they prayed for everyone."⁵⁶ He concludes by offering the highest praise he can imagine: "They were called 'agents of salvation for everyone'" (LXXVII). For John, this summary and paragraph conclude the teachings (*didaskalias*) of Paisios. The most noble role, and greatest honor, that a holy teacher can have is to be a savior, blood-brother to Christ. So holy is Paisios that his "agency of salvation" continues even after death. As John concludes in the final paragraph of the *Life*, "All those who were troubled by unclean spirits or any other kind of illness were healed by merely touching the honorable caskets [of Paisios and Paul of Tamma]⁵⁷ and no one could possibly recount in full all the wondrous miracles God demonstrated and performed after the burial of the holy men" (LXXX).

For the monk reading or listening to the *Life*, Paisios, "holy and perfect," is the perfect role model. If the reader or listener is a young, or at least less experienced, monk—a *mathētēs*, disciple and pupil—he has before him Paisios, who grew from a disciple to become a teacher; not only a teacher but also a wonderworker, spiritual advisor, discernor of spirits, defender of the faith, mystic, and intercessor. If the reader or listener is an older, or more experienced monk—an *abba*—he has the same role model in Paisios as the young monk, but he learns humility by essentially working backwards from the way the young monk learns: by looking back at Paisios the accomplished master monk to Paisios the apprentice, the older monk sees in Paisios' journey the footsteps he too has followed, and still hopes to follow further.

Further, though, Paisios' life and example teach both the young monk and the old monk that the progression from disciple to teacher is not strictly linear (just as the categories we use for discussing the holy man are useful, but bounded), as a person leaves one room for another, but that all the rooms of the monastic life are coterminous, radiating out from a common center. What Joseph Epes Brown observes, writing about "Concepts of Time and Process" in Native North American religion, applies equally well to Paisios and early Christian monasticism:

⁵⁶ On Paul of Tamma, and his relation to Paisios, see ch. 5, "Saint Paul of Tamma and the Life of the Cell," in Vivian, *Words to Live By* (n. 4 above).

⁵⁷ These posthumous healings, absent in the *Life of Antony*, suggest that the *Life of Paisios* is several centuries later than the *Life of Antony* although the absence of such miracles in the *Life of Antony* may be due to no more than the fact that, as Antony requested, the place of his burial was unknown except to the two disciples who buried him (XIIC).

Time in this context is experienced as a seamless unity. Stages of life fold into the present, for, in the cycle of time/life, what we have experienced becomes integrated into who we are now. This process fosters expansion and wholeness, rather than the contraction and fragmentation so typical of linear perspective, in which what one has passed through is progressively left behind.⁵⁸

A disciple is not yet a teacher, but a teacher is still a disciple. And, since the teacher of the monastic teacher-as-disciple is Christ, monastic education (*paideia*) and the monastic way of life (*pōliteia*) are both Christocentric. All the rooms have Christ at the center.

⁵⁸ Joseph Epes Brown, with Emily Cousins, *Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford U 2001) 14.

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